

How to Choose a Primary Care Provider

Finding the right primary care provider can be a game-changer when it comes to successfully navigating your healthcare needs. And, while bedside manner matters, many other factors should also be considered when seeking your perfect match.

By Trudie Mitschang

PRIMARY CARE providers (PCPs) are the go-to resource for patients' healthcare needs. Their role is to advise, educate, examine, treat and help patients make important healthcare decisions. Perhaps most importantly, they are there to listen. That's why it's so important for you as a patient to find a provider you trust — someone you can talk to honestly and openly about your concerns.

Finding the right fit is somewhat subjective and starts with defining what is important to you in a patient-provider relationship. PCPs work with patients of all kinds to prevent, diagnose and treat injuries and illnesses, but since living with chronic illness is nuanced, additional factors are important to consider such as a genuine willingness to partner with patients and advocate for their care. The best PCPs exhibit exceptional listening skills and earnest compassion, and they are adept at coordinating patient care on an individualized basis. They are quick to make referrals to specialists, willing to learn about rare diseases and eager to work with you to find healthcare solutions that improve your overall quality of life.

What Type of PCP Do You Need?

Several types of clinicians can be PCPs, including family practitioners, general practitioners, internal medicine specialists, geriatricians, physician assistants and nurse practitioners. While many of these roles overlap, they do have subtle differences:



- Family practice physicians treat patients of all genders and ages, from newborns to the elderly. They diagnose and treat the entire range of medical conditions that affect an entire family, including pediatrics, geriatrics, obstetrics and gynecology. They are generalists who can treat a wide variety of conditions, including ailments for which patients would normally see a specialist such as sports injuries or women's health needs.

- General practice physicians also treat patients of any gender or age, but unlike family practice physicians, they do not necessarily provide care to an entire family unit. Some general practitioners are also doctors of osteopathic medicine (DOs), physicians who practice a type of alternative medicine with special focus on the musculoskeletal system and often offer manual medicine therapies such as spinal manipulation or massage therapy. They are distinguished by the medical degree acronym "DO" instead of "MD."

- Internal medicine physicians, or "internists," provide primary care of adults, as well as specialized care for the prevention, diagnosis and management of disease and chronic conditions. They often work with patients in both clinical and hospital settings.

- Geriatricians are physicians who have additional training in treating older adults, especially those 65 and older.

- Certified physician assistants (PA-Cs) are highly trained,

board-certified clinicians who can practice in any field they choose, including primary care. Primary care PA-Cs provide preventive care, diagnose and treat common illnesses, develop treatment plans, prescribe medications, make referrals, perform minor procedures and more.

- Nurse practitioners (NPs) are advanced practice clinicians qualified to perform annual checkups, prescribe medications and conduct follow-up visits for routine evaluation. NPs tend to emphasize health promotion and disease prevention.

In-Network vs. Out-of-Network Options

If you have health insurance and opt to choose an in-network provider to keep costs down, you can start by making a list of PCPs in your area that are also covered by your particular insurance plan. This will narrow down the search criteria so you don't waste time researching clinicians who don't accept your coverage.

Your insurance plan may also allow you to work with a PCP who is out of network at a higher cost. While rate sheets give general cost guidelines, it's still best to confirm coverage to avoid unpleasant billing surprises after receiving care. Be sure to call your insurance representative to confirm out-of-pocket expenses before establishing care. If you don't have health insurance and you will be paying out of pocket, ask your prospective PCP about out-of-pockets costs. Knowing what you will be charged before you establish care can help you plan and budget for future visits.

Ask for Recommendations

One of the best ways to find a great PCP is to ask for recommendations from people you know and trust. Family, friends and colleagues are excellent sources of information about providers they like. Online community forums such

as [Nextdoor.com](https://www.nextdoor.com), Facebook groups and other web-based networking sites can also be helpful, especially when it comes to finding PCPs in your local area. You can also ask for recommendations from other health professionals you already routinely see and trust. Pharmacists, optometrists, dentists, physical therapists (the list could go on!) are all good sources of quality referrals. Once you have identified a list of at least three potential PCP candidates, narrow your selection based on your personal needs and preferences.

Check the Ratings

Even if you have a referral from a respected source, you still may want to check on their overall ratings from a trusted online rating platform. The following sites make it easy to find a great provider by location and specialty. In addition to patient reviews and satisfaction ratings, many sites also provide background information, including education, board certifications, awards and published research.¹





- CareDash lists provider ratings and patient reviews: [caredash.com](https://www.caredash.com)

- Castle Connolly lists top doctors based on peer nomination and review by a physician-directed research team: [castleconnolly.com](https://www.castleconnolly.com)

- Healthgrades provides details about provider experience, patient satisfaction and hospital quality: [healthgrades.com](https://www.healthgrades.com)

- RateMDs locates rated doctors by name, location or specialty: [ratemds.com](https://www.ratemds.com)

- U.S. News Doctor Rankings provides ratings and advice articles on finding doctors, hospitals, nursing homes and health plans: [health.usnews.com/doctors](https://www.health.usnews.com/doctors)

- Vitals provides detailed profiles on doctors, including patient reviews and peer recommendations: [vitals.com](https://www.vitals.com)

- WebMD Physician Directory lists physicians by education, practice type, insurance and contact information: [doctor.webmd.com](https://www.doctor.webmd.com)

- ZocDoc allows patients to find local doctors, read patient reviews and book appointments online: [zocdoc.com](https://www.zocdoc.com)

- The American Board of Medical Specialties' Certification Matters site maintains a searchable database of board-certified doctors where patients can check providers' certification status: [certificationmatters.org](https://www.certificationmatters.org)

- Medicare offers a physician compare tool to help patients find providers who specialize in the kind of care needed: [medicare.gov/care-compare](https://www.medicare.gov/care-compare)

Consider the Logistics

Once you have vetted the reviews and have compiled a list of PCP candidates with whom to consult, consider the logistics of each potential provider. How far is the practice from your home, school or office? How often do you anticipate needing in-office appointments in a calendar year? Does the practice offer telehealth options? If so, in what capacity? (Many practices now let patients complete forms, request prescriptions and communicate with the billing office without having to pick up a phone. If this level of convenience is important to you, be sure to clarify what is and is not available.) If you only see your PCP for annual physicals, a top-rated provider whose office is a farther distance away than you prefer to travel may still be worth seeing if you only plan to go to in-office appointments one time per year. Another thing to consider is what time

of day you are likely to schedule appointments. A mid-morning office visit to a practice across town may be much easier to manage than an after-work appointment during rush hour traffic.

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Questions to Ask During the Consultation

After deciding to move forward with a potential PCP candidate, review the PCP's website and follow up with a phone call, preferably with a new patient coordinator, and make sure to ask these questions:

- Are basic procedures such as blood draws, lab tests, X-rays and minor surgeries performed at the same facility as the clinic? If not, where are these services offered?

- Is the clinic a group practice? How busy is your preferred provider? How likely is it you will be seen by your preferred provider versus someone else on staff?

- What are the clinic's hours? Are evening, weekend or on-call services available? How long does it generally take to get an appointment? How far out is the provider currently booked?

- Does the practice offer telemedicine visits or virtual care options, or utilize telehealth technologies such as online appointment scheduling, bill pay, email messaging and lab results?

Evaluate the Support Staff

You are going to engage with the patient care team regularly — sometimes more frequently than with the PCP. Whether making appointments or rescheduling them, resolving billing issues or requesting prescription refills, many of your interactions with the clinic will be handled by frontline staff, so that is where first impressions really count. When calling the office, does a human answer the phone or does the call consistently go to voicemail? Is the patient care team courteous and patient? Do they respect your privacy and address you appropriately? Do



they help facilitate contact between you and the provider, or are they more of a roadblock? The patient care team is an important part of your healthcare experience, so make sure to give this piece of the decision the amount of attention it deserves.

Pay Attention to the Details

Even if the prospective PCP's website shows a beautifully appointed clinic with all the bells and whistles and the phone system seems to check all the boxes, it's still a good idea to make an in-person trip to the actual office to see if it's a good fit. Here are some things to look for:

- Is the reception area well-kept and calm?
- Is the waiting room overcrowded with people waiting to be seen?
- Does the medical equipment appear to be up-to-date and working well?
- Are the exam rooms clean and private?

A recent scientific survey found that the cleanliness and modernity of a physician's practice has a significant impact on patients' overall satisfaction rating, so look for an up-to-date, well-kept waiting room. For example, a waiting room with tattered chairs and a basket of grungy, out-of-date magazines might be a red flag.

Communication Is Key

Good communication is central to the provider/patient relationship. Patients want to be able to talk openly to and build a trusted partnership with a provider that is mutually respectful. A study by Research Trusted Source found a strong correlation between a provider's communication style and patients' sense of satisfaction with their healthcare.² Therefore, during your one-on-one meeting with a prospective PCP, consider the following questions:

- Did the provider tend to lecture and drone on, or did he/she take a genuine interest in me?
- Did the provider make and maintain eye contact with me, or did he/she look down at a notepad for the duration of my visit?

- Did the provider take time to listen to my questions and answer them patiently?
- Did I feel rushed or disrespected?
- Did the provider dismiss my concerns or interrupt me frequently?
- Did the provider explain things to me in a way I could understand?
- Would I feel comfortable talking to the provider about sensitive or personal health issues?

Trust Your Gut

You are a unique individual. Your age, gender, life experiences and specific medical condition(s) have all shaped your perspective about your body and its care, which influences how you interact with healthcare providers. As you think about what you need from your PCP, consider whether the provider and the practice can accommodate your special needs or disabilities. Have you experienced any past trauma in a medical setting that impacts your preferences going forward? Do you need a provider who is knowledgeable about your specific illness? Don't be afraid to ask PCPs the hard questions, and pay close attention to their responses. Remember: You are paying them!

Making Your Final Decision

Many of us are used to thinking of medical providers as authority figures. There's something about classic white coats and stethoscopes (or the fact that, in many cases, we are wearing little more than a paper bag during the interaction) that make us feel awkward or uncomfortable about questioning them. It may help to think of yourself as an equal partner working with a PCP to improve your overall health. Remember: You are your own best healthcare advocate and when you "hire" a PCP, you are paying for a service. You take time to interview a contractor and mechanic before allowing them to work on your home or automobile; how much more valuable is your body and your health? Choosing the right fit for you takes time and effort, but the benefits of finding a trustworthy provider with whom you feel comfortable will be well worth it in the long run. 

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